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DEQ staffer disturbed by reopening of school after asbestos scare

HELENA (AP) — A state employee is disturbed that Thompson Falls school administrators reopened a building to children after an asbestos scare that halted classes for several days.

Pierre Amicucci, an asbestos specialist for the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, said he worries the building poses an asbestos hazard. It should have been cleaned better, Amicucci said. School Superintendent Jerry Pauli said cleaning was adequate and there is no evidence the building puts occupants at risk for exposure to airborne asbestos, a carcinogen.

At issue is the "dorm," a two-story building that was a residence hall years ago and now houses kindergarten, sixth grade, a computer laboratory and administrative offices, including Pauli's. This spring, plans to replace the sagging roof led to preliminary work that included testing attic insulation for asbestos.

One of nine samples exceeded the asbestos level at which the federal govern-

ment requires abatement, Amicucci said last week, adding that "if one sample comes back hot, the whole, homogeneous area is considered to be contaminated."

An abatement contractor began removing insulation during the school district's March 25-29 Easter break.

Amicucci said he visited the site and found violations of several required practices.

Workers used a "dry" rather than a "wet" process necessary to control dust, he said, and there were no airtight barriers between the attic and the building's second floor. Even

after some cleaning, dust was evident, he said. DEQ required the building remain closed for fear of asbestos contamination, action that extended the school break until April 4.

"It is possible that asbestos fibers may have spread to various areas of the school building," the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said in a March 31 letter to Pauli. The EPA called for the entire building to be cleaned.

Further testing of the insu-

lation, using a type of analysis considered more accurate than the initial method, found an asbestos level below the federal threshold for abatement, Pauli said. Amicucci doesn't dispute that the second test yielded more favorable results, but said the school district jumped on the report "like (it was) a get-out-of-jail-free card."

"It's not like it's hazardous on one side of the line and not hazardous on the other," he said. "There is no safe level of asbestos." He said he gave approval to reoccupy the building because under the regulations, "I had no choice."

In an April 11 letter to Pauli, the EPA said that "it is not to be assumed that the 1 percent regulatory threshold (triggering abatement) is a health standard." Exposure to any level of asbestos is hazardous and inhaling fibers can lead to lung cancer or other diseases, often not apparent for many years, the agency said. Pauli said the letter arrived about two weeks after classes resumed in the building.

"I don't have any fear for our students," he said Monday. "We have not seen any indication that there is a problem here."



Schools